

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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WHOOPING CRANES FACE POTENTIAL CHOLERA THREAT IN NEBRASKA

A series of precautionary moves to protect endangered whooping cranes from an outbreak of avian cholera in Nebraska has been implemented by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Since April 4th at least 14 whooping cranes have begun their spring migration to Canada from the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge along Texas' Gulf Coast. Their normal migratory path takes them across the cholera outbreak area, which is on a state waterfowl management unit in south central Nebraska some 20 miles south of the Platte River. The cranes have not been seen in this area yet. They have stopped off in the vicinity of the present cholera outbreak in the past. The whooping cranes were sighted in Kansas the first week in April. Migration has been slowed by recent bad weather north of Kansas.

Avian cholera was diagnosed on April 10 as the killer of over 15,000 waterfowl at the Sacramento Special Game Management Area near Kearney, Nebraska, and at several locations close by. About 140,000 ducks and geese are there now.

Alert state wildlife officials in Nebraska immediately notified Federal wildlife authorities, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Director Lynn A. Greenwalt invoked an emergency waiver provision of the Endangered Species Act to authorize disturbance of the whooping cranes should they

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approach the diseased area. Disturbance is prohibited by the law under all but emergency situations jeopardizing the life of any endangered animal.

The purpose of the physical disturbance, which will be done by ground scare devices and light aircraft, is to keep the endangered cranes from landing at the Sacramento unit and force them to seek another resting spot so they won't be infected by the fatal disease. There are many other natural rain basins in the vicinity of the Platte River where the cranes could rest.

Nebraska wildlife officials have sent in a team of biologists to contain the disease at this one locale and to clean up and burn the dead ducks and geese. Avian cholera is a gastrointestinal disease fatal among waterfowl. Birds infected with it usually die within a matter of days. Those that are exposed, but survive, become carriers.

State and Federal officials have light aircraft standing by and are now reconnoitering the general area to keep cranes away from the diseased area.

Fortunately, whooping cranes are easily hazed and will shy away from aircraft at a great distance. Also, human activity on the ground will frighten them away. The presence of cleanup teams alone might keep the whoopers off the infected waterfowl management unit, but scaring devices are being set up on the ground in case they are needed.

Additional assistance is being provided in the form of scientific advice from the Denver Wildlife Research Center, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service facility. Bird health and disease specialists from Denver and Federal biologists in the area are available for any further contingency efforts that might be deemed necessary.

The outbreak of cholera is potentially very troublesome because all migratory waterfowl in the central plains states are now in the process of moving northward to their nesting areas.

There are only 49 whooping cranes in the wild. They winter at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in Texas and each spring leave in pairs or threes beginning usually in late March with the last whoopers leaving no later than April 20th. Their trip to Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada's Northwest Territories takes as long as 30 days. There were still 35 whoopers in Texas as of April 9th.